George's PINK PAGES February 2002

Major Honey Crop or Dead Bees in 2002?

It Is Up To You!

After arriving home from the week long American Beekeeping Federation meeting in Savannah GA, my computer was crammed with e-mail and asking for help. I drove over to a beekeeper's home to see his one colony of bees. I found just a hand full of dead bees and the dead queen in a 2 story hive that still had 30-40 lbs. of honey in it. Dead in January, very small cluster of bees, and still plenty of winter honey stores are the classic symptoms of tracheal mite infection. When I asked if he had treated with MENTHOL in August or Grease Patties since July, I got a disgusting, sad reply from this beeHAVER (certainly not a beeKEEPER) when he replied "Some other beekeepers said that there aren't tracheal mites around here." I thought to myself, "Am I wasting my time trying to upgrade beeHAVERS into beeKEEPERS?" In this case, I am glad that much of both January and December had been warm, for otherwise I am sure that the death of this colony would have been blamed on "cold weather"; and I have explained ad nauseum that cold does not kill healthy bees.

Now it is February, and the weather forecast is seasonable cold weather for both February and March, which is far better for bees than this unseasonable warm weather we have had for the last 3 months. Will your bees be ready to make a good honey crop here in central Maryland in April and May? Mine will! In conversation with some of my Master Beekeepers, we ALL agree that this devilish warm weather and even raising some brood has used up a lot of winter stored honey and many bees will die of starvation unless the beekeeper starts feeding his bees in February. What a sad death it must be to STARVE, and you can prevent it by feeding sugar syrup! Of course, my bees will be fed anyhow starting now in order to stimulate queen egg laying, but unfortunately, many beekeepers just "can't be bothered" to stimulate egg laying in February, and then wonder why there honey crop is so low compared to mine. One should realize that, unlike other parts of the country, essentially 90% of the honey produced in Maryland is made mostly in April and May, maybe some sweet clover in June, and that is all. No longer can we count on alfalfa or goldenrod, because there is little pasture for these blooms. Hence, it is very important to have your colony population as strong as possible by mid April.

By way of review: Why stimulate egg laying in February or early March? To gain a good honey crop, like 100-150 pounds/colony, there must be a LOT of foraging age bees. Foraging age begins when a bee becomes 19 days old. The first 18 days of it life, the worker bee does NOT forage for nectar, pollen, propolis, or water, but remains IN the hive during "house work" like cleaning and polishing cells for the queen to lay eggs, feeding bee larvae several hundred times for 6 days, comb building, packing nectar in cells, ripening nectar into honey, feeding and grooming the queen, etc., etc. The gestation period of a worker bee is 21 days, but that new bee does house work for 18 days, and does not go out foraging until the 40th day after its egg was laid. That FORTY DAYS is as important as your social security number if you are to be a good beekeeper! Hence, if a major nectar flow from black locust, tulip poplar, or blackberry starts on May 1st, the worker bee egg that is going to make a forager age bee by May 1st

has to be laid before MARCH 21st, which is 40 days before May 1st. Further, the queen will not lay eggs in comb space that is less than about 95¡, and it take a lot of house bees to warm to warm a lot of comb for the queen to lay in. Now you can understand why I start feeding 1:1 sugar syrup or 1:2 thinner sugar syrup + pollen substitute (I spread 3-4 tablespoons of Mann Lake Bee-Pro on frame tops) to my bees early in February.

I do trust that you understand that there is a fine line between having a colony strong enough to make a heavy yield of honey or swarming; and this is the reason I continue to talk about swarm control. In the January edition of the PINK PAGES, I wrote a good bit about REVERSING. Reversing is a major anti-swarm management tool that you should be using to break up brood chamber congestion which is now considered the number ONE cause of swarming. Age of your queen is considered the number TWO cause of swarming in swarm SEASON, which is April and early May in central Maryland. Swarming during a good honey flow in middle to late May is due to lack of enough supers of DRAWN COMB in place AHEAD of the bee's need for space, which is all YOUR FAULT, not the bees.

You don't take a pill of penicillin or some antibiotic every day to prevent you from having the flu, do you? Then why do you treat your bees with Apistan or CheckMite without TESTING the colony for mite population? By treating when the bees don't need treatment, you are shortening the bees life plus increasing the resistance of the mites so that your treatment won't work the next time you need it. DON'T TREAT WITHOUT TESTING FIRST FOR MITE POPULATION! For several years, I do a 24 TEST for varroa mites with one strip of Apistan on April 1st and July 1st and I have only had to make a treatment on just one hive in July. My use of Apistan for 6 weeks from October 1 to November 15th really does a fine killing job, so spring and summer treatments are not necessary; BUT I TEST IN APRIL AND JULY TO PROVE THAT TREATMENT IS NOT NEEDED RATHER THAN JUST ASSUME IT! I don't like the ether-roll test or the powdered sugar test, so I use the STICKY BOARD TEST to get accuracy.

I hope every reader has a record honey crop in 2002!
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I am having surgery on my stroke disabled vocal cord on February 28th which is the next thing to being experimental. If successful, maybe I will be able to CHEER for you for each of your successes and YELL at you when you foul up!
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I hope the surgery does not negate my typing, because I plan on telling you all about HYGIENIC bees in the March Pink Pages, and how you can test your own bees to see if they have good "hygiene". Many bee scientists believe that the use of HYGIENIC bees will be the solution to curtail use of chemicals for mite control. I surely hope so!